"The Haunted Church"

A Sermon by Pastor Harlen Rife

Hebrews 12:1-3 November 1, 2026/All Saints/All Souls
John 17:20-25

A great ghost story needs a good opening line. There's the classic, "it was a dark and stormy night." There's the Christmas option, "Marley was dead to begin with." Today, we have the Biblical classic, "we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses." Our reading from Paul today conjures up a powerful image. As we move through our life of faith, we are surrounded by those who went before us. They are there to witness and cheer on our works of piety and mercy. When the race is run, they are there to welcome us with open arms into the heavenly kingdom.

I think it's important to say that most scholars do not believe that we should take this passage literally. Paul is calling to mind the example of the saints with this powerful image, but he is not implying that, when you die, you spend all day keeping an eye on the living. There's a line in the Ken Burns Baseball documentary that I think captures what Paul is saying. The narrator says, "It is a haunted game, where each player is measured by the ghosts of those who have gone before." When a new player steps onto the field, he is really stepping into the shoes of Lou Gehrig, Babe Ruth, or Stachel Paige. Ours is not a spirit of comparison and competition, but I like the idea that the example of the past is always hovering around us.

And, there are some Christians who do take Paul a little more literally. We read one example. I thought it was in Anthony Gittins but I couldn't find it in my notes. In any case, he tells the story of a missionary working with a new Christian community in Africa. Many in the community grew up with the idea of ancestor-worship. Their traditional beliefs embraced the idea that their ancestors were with them and could guide them. One of the leaders pointed to this passage in Paul about the great cloud of witnesses and said, when we read that, we see something of our culture in the New Testament. The missionary was upset, believing this is a misinterpretation of Paul and a dangerous form of syncretism (the blending of Christian and non-Christian beliefs). The elder smiled and said, "we'll just have to agree to disagree about that."

The truth is, most of the Christians I know believe that the dead can, from time to time, send messages to the living. The church secretary at Pearl Road UMC had recently lost her mother. Her mother would often sing and talk about pennies from heaven. Helen noticed that, when times were tough and she was feeling blue, she'd often find a penny on the ground. She'd smile and say, "thanks, mom." Just hours after Sam passed away, people from across Green gathered for a vigil at the park. It was gray and rainy but, as the vigil was underway, the clouds opened and there was a rainbow. We've had a mysterious rash of rainbows ever since.

Here's another good Pearl Road story. I did a funeral for a long-time member named Faye. When I visited her husband Mike in their home, I quickly realized that the whole house was covered in trains. I thought Mike was a railroad aficionado, but he corrected me and said, "no, that's all Faye." She loved trains her whole life. She grew up in West Virginia in a house so close to the tracks you had to hold down your plate when the express went by. She moved to Cleveland, married Mike, and they settled at the end of a Norfolk Southern yard. She had train pictures, train Christmas ornaments, toy trains, trains carved out of coal, and train whistles. That spring, we gathered for her graveside service. We opened with a prayer and then I asked for a moment of silence. In the middle of that silence, as if we planned it, we heard the echo of a train horn come rolling through the valley. I still get goose pimples thinking about it.

I call those a nod, or a tip of the cap. Some Christians I know believe that the dead can do a little more. My mother-in-law tells a story about their first house in Cleveland. Madeline and her brother were little and one of them had a fever. She spent all night going in and out of the child's room to check on them. Then, as she went yet another time, she saw the figure of a woman coming out of the child's room. She was stunned but, when she rushed in to check on the baby, the fever had broken. Later, she learned the previous owner of the house was a nurse who died in the home. The folks at Pearl Road swore the church was haunted. One of the trustees said, "I can't tell you how many times I have searched and searched the basement for a tool and left, only to come back and find it sitting in the middle of the table." Another talked about the day he walked in and heard his father's voice echoing through the building. He turned right around and ran out! There's a warning in that. If you volunteer for trustees, it might be forever!

What do you believe? Do the dead sleep until the resurrection. Are they far away in heaven? Or are they closer to us than we imagine? To tell you the truth, the older I get the fewer things I know for sure. If I had to hazard a guess, it would be that time doesn't work the way we think it does and the barrier between heaven and earth is much thinner than it seems. We see it in little boxes – past, present, and future; heaven and earth, -- but God experiences it as one. I think we see that in our gospel lesson today.

First, let's have a little context. In John 13, Jesus has his final meal with the disciples. He washes their feet and predicts Peter's denial. Then, the next few chapters are almost a parting address from Jesus. In chapter 14, he comforts them in their distress saying, "in my Father's house there are many rooms," and promises them the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In 15, he encourages them to remain rooted in him like branches and a vine. In 16 he promises them their coming grief will turn to joy. Finally, in chapter 17, he prays for his own glorification and for the disciples. Then, in chapter 18, he's arrested. Our passage is from the chapter before his arrest.

Jesus prays for his disciples asking that they have a full measure of his joy and that they will be protected from the evil one. Then, he expands his prayer saying, "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you." Jesus prays for the disciples and for all who will believe in because of them. Jesus is praying for the followers of the present and for the followers of the future. In some ways, he's even praying for you. He was praying for both the present and the future. You can do that, too.

My friend Pastor Shannon is returning to Church of the Redeemer in Cleveland Heights. She served there during seminary and is returning there for a few months to fill in while they await their permanent appointment. That news caused me to remember a story she told years ago when she was first appointed there. One of her parishioners told her that, when she was a girl, the conference moved her beloved pastor to another church. She was devastated but found a way out through prayer. She made it a part of her daily devotion to pray for all the pastors who had ever served at Redeemer, for their current pastor, and for the pastors that would serve there in the future. She looked at Shannon and said, "you're the first pastor I can say this to. I have been praying for you since before you were born."

I think that's the lesson for the church on All Saints and All Souls. The secular world subdivides time into past present and future. In the church, we try to see time the way God does – as a moment. The past is no foreign land, and the future is not far away. We worship alongside the saints of old even as we hold a place for the next generation. Those we have loved and lost are still always with us. The love we share in this life will go on and on. So, cherish and pray for the saints you've known. Love and pray for the living around us now. Pray for those yet to come. Put your trust in our future in Christ Jesus. Every ghost story needs a good ending line, too. Mine is, "live with a love that knows no ending." **Amen.**